The Two Yemens

Robin Bidwell

THE TWO YEMENS

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The Two Yemens

ROBIN BIDWELL

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To my Yemeni friends
in the hope that
their future will be as glorious
and as prosperous as much of their past

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Abbreviations

APL	Aden Protectorate Levies
ATUC	Aden Trade Union Congress
EAP	Eastern Aden Protectorate
FLOSY	Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen
FNG	Federal National Guard
FRA	Federal Regular Army
GG	Government Guards
HBL	Hadhrami Beduin Legion
MCC	Military Command Council
NDF	National Democratic Front
NFLOSY	National Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen
NLA	National Liberation Army
NLF	National Liberation Front
OLOS	Organisation for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
PDU	People's Democratic Union
PORF	People's Organisation of Revolutionary Forces
PRSY	People's Republic of South Yemen
PSP	People's Socialist Party
SAAF	South Arabian Armed Forces
SAL	South Arabian League
UNF	United National Front
UNFPO	United National Front Political Organisation
WAP	Western Aden Protectorate
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party

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Glossary

Banyan an Indian trader.

Dola literally "The State" but used to mean the ruling family and its hangers-on in the Aden Protectorates.

Jihad literally "striving" but used to mean holy war.

Naib a Deputy.

Qadi in most of the Islamic world a judge of religious law but used in Zaydi areas for any member of the hereditary class of scholars or administrators.

qat (leaves from) a shrub which resembles privet and which is chewed as a stimulant by Yemenis.

Sayyid a title denoting proven descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson Hussayn ibn Ali.

Shariah Muslim law based on the Qur'an and the doings and sayings of the Prophet.

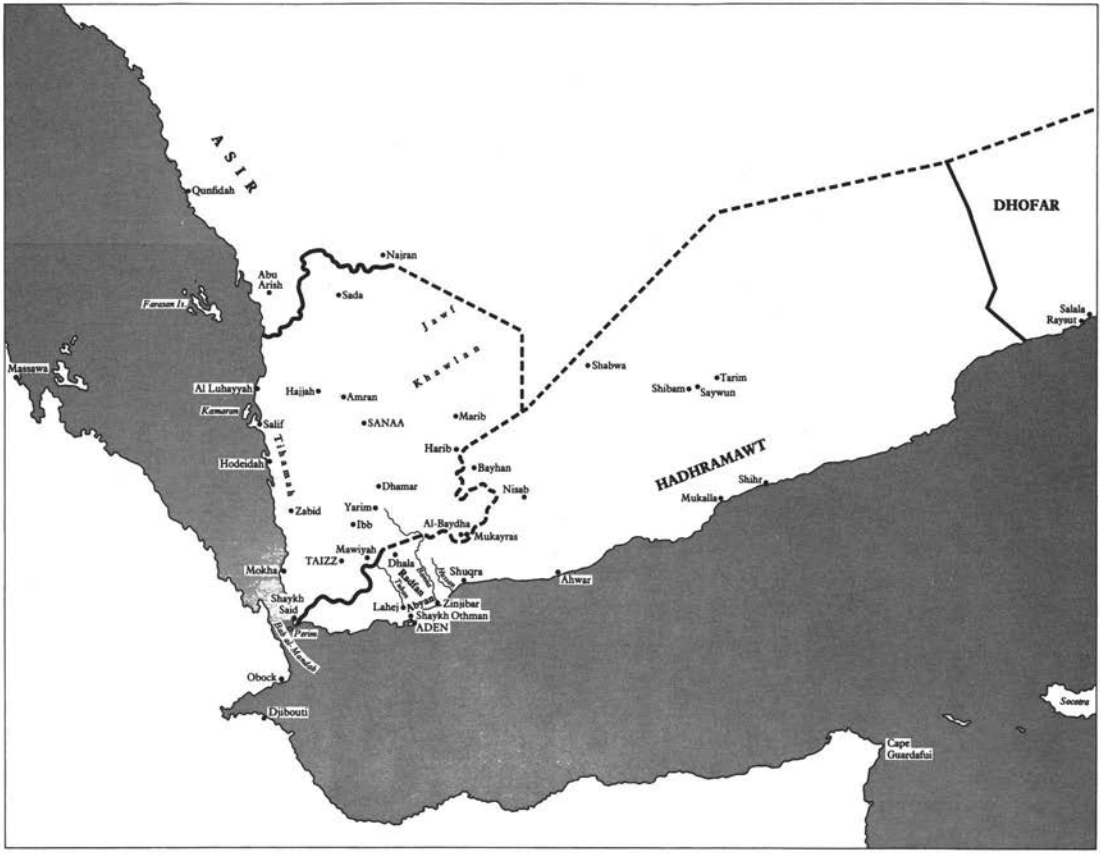
Sharif a title denoting proven descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson Hassan ibn Ali.

Shaykh in most of Arabia a title of respect or the head of a tribal group. In the Aden Protectorate it has the special meaning of a member of an hereditary religious family not descended from the Prophet. Some may be of pre-Islamic origin while others stem from popular saints.

ulama men learned in Muslim law and traditions.

waqf (*pl. awqaf*) property bequeathed to provide income for a pious purpose.

Map showing location of South West Arabia



Introduction

A Classics Don once said to me "what we ordinary chaps want is a history of Arabia without a mass of confusing names and details". This advice I have borne in mind in the hope that this, the first book in over a hundred years to treat North and South Yemen as a single unit, will be of interest to the general reader, although I should be happy if my academic colleagues also found it useful.

Thus I have made it a rule not to introduce too many names and have avoided doing so whenever possible unless a character is mentioned several times. My more pedantic friends will be shocked to find that I have written "Ahmad Muhammad al-Shami" instead of "Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Shāmī" and have used the simplest form of place names ("Sanaa" instead of "Ṣan'ā'"), but I think that the general reader would prefer it this way. I have also refrained from an intimidating barrage of notes and references.

South West Arabia is an area of great strategic importance, controlling as it does the entrance to the Red Sea which gives access to the "front doors" of Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Ethiopia, and the "back doors" of Egypt and Israel. There is no doubt that it possesses oil, although it has yet to be found in quantities which would make its exploitation commercially worthwhile. It contains half the population of the Arabian Peninsula, attractive people of much charm, intelligence and commercial skill.

Few parts of the world have more to offer to visitors. Most of it is far removed from the stereotyped image of sandy desert, for few places are greener than the fields around Ibb or provide more beautiful colour, changing with every passing cloud, than

the mountains of Audhali and Dathinah. The most experienced traveller still stands amazed at the unique architecture of Sanaa or Shibam.

Traditional Muslim genealogists have held that the ancestor of the Arabs was Shem, the son of Noah, and that subsequently his descendants have divided into two lines – the sons of Adnan in the North of the Peninsula and those of Qahtan in the South. There is indeed a quite noticeable physical difference between the usually small, slightly-built Yemenis and their larger, sturdier brethren of the Hejaz or Najd: in the *suqs* of Riyadh or Jeddah one is rarely mistaken when saying to someone "you must be a Yemeni". There is also a strong emotional feeling that they are a distinct part of the Arab nation, a single people despite the vicissitudes of history. This book aims to tell the story of the Yemeni people, treating them as a single people.

For the first part of this book, historical fact indeed dictates that this should be done. We begin by showing that all over South West Arabia a unique civilisation arose in antiquity and many of its manifestations so conformed to the Yemeni temperament that they have lingered, little changed, until the present day. The coming of Sunni Islam carried the pattern a stage further and gave the people religious links which stretched from Morocco to the East Indies. Two hundred and fifty years after the death of the Prophet, his descendants secured a permanent following amongst the great tribal confederations of the northern mountains who adopted, almost as a badge, their own individual form of Shi'ite religion. With this rise of the Zaydi Imamate, South West Arabia had assembled all the elements that were to last a millennium. The rest of the first chapter shows that despite intermittent strife between groups of its people, life in mediaeval Yemen was as rich and as cultured as anywhere in the contemporary world – another fact which distinguishes it from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula.

Our treatment of the Yemenis as a single people extends indeed over two thousand years, for the second chapter, covering three centuries from 1530 to 1830 shows them also as an entity if not always as a unitary state. This period ends as firstly the British and then the Ottoman Turks came upon the scene. For the first time a formal frontier, artificially created to suit Imperial needs, divided North from South, and although all

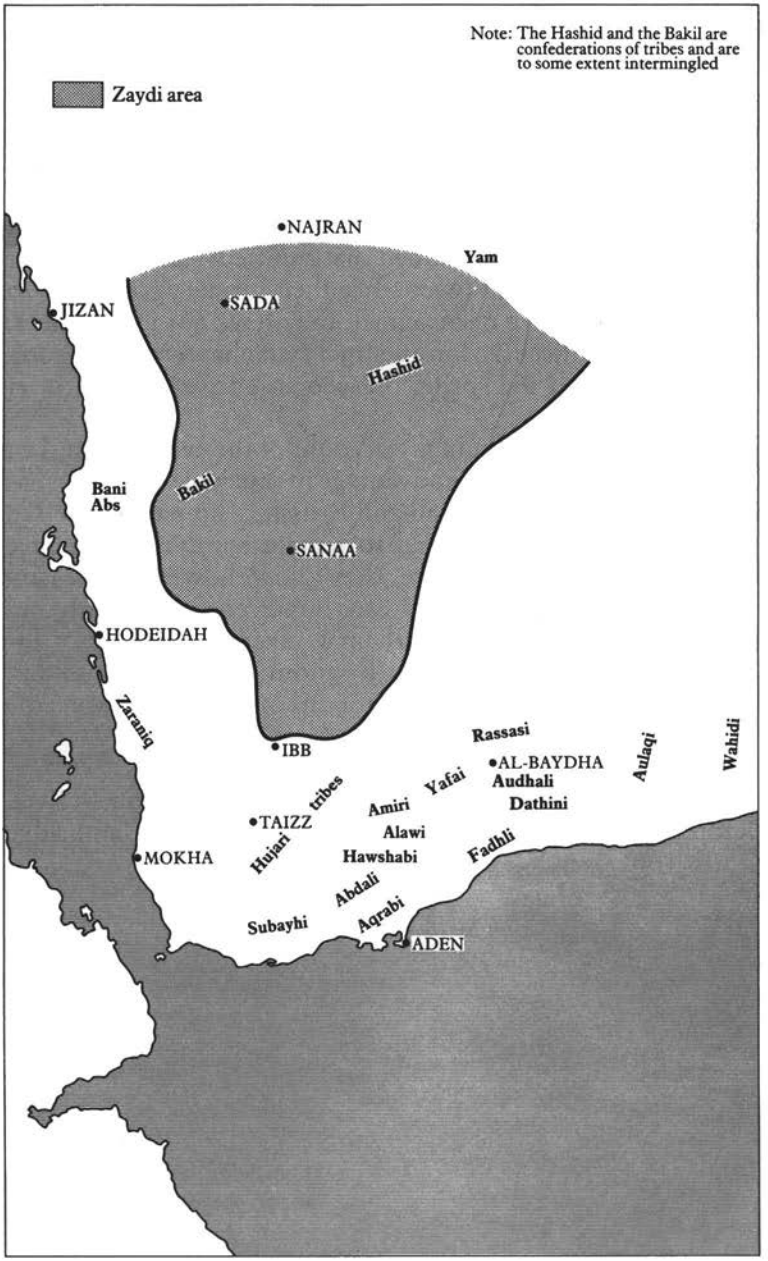
the Zaydis were within the Turkish sphere, the Shafais were, without being consulted, divided in half. The two areas were subjected to different systems of rule for over a hundred years and they developed in such divergent ways that for this period, and for this period only, we have to study them separately.

A new era began in 1967 with the withdrawal of the British and the almost simultaneous coming to power in North and South of regimes which claimed that a united Yemen was their dearest wish. Although twice since then formal agreements to bring this about have been signed, they have not taken effect: the reasons are discussed in the final two chapters. This book was completed in the spring of 1980 so I have added a brief postscript.

It will be obvious that in my account of the events of the last thirty years, I have had the advantage of much private information from friends, both Arab and British, who participated in events. As some have wished to remain anonymous, I have decided to name none of them: they know, however, that I am most grateful for their help. I can, however, mention my old friend, Dr Rex Smith of Durham University, a mine of information on the country, with whom I could discuss any problem. Naturally neither he, nor anyone else, is responsible for my mistakes.

Robin Bidwell
October 1981 Middle East Centre, Cambridge

Map showing tribes of South West Arabia



Chapter One

Pre-Islamic and Mediaeval Yemen

The Yemen in the Pre-Islamic Era

As late as the 1960s it was the custom of every commentator on North Yemen to state, with the air of one making a profound and original observation, that the country was still living in the Middle Ages. There was more than a grain of truth in this view, and, indeed, some of the customs of the country were even older; so it is necessary, in a way that it is not for other Arabian states whose history effectively begins with the discovery of oil, to say something about the early history of the area. Able scholars have chronicled these years in detail so it is not the intention of this author to give particulars of the fortunes of dynasties long since disappeared, but rather to give an outline which will show their relevance to the present day.

There is no doubt that man was active in South-West Arabia from ancient times. We need not accept the legend that Cain was exiled to Aden (although a tomb reputed to be his was shown near the Main Pass), but archaeologists say that the area was used for hunting 75,000 years ago, and flints used 15,000 years ago have been recovered. Tradition identifies Joktan, the great-great-great-grandson of Noah, with Qahtan, who is regarded as the ancestor of the Southern Arabs and as the man who brought agriculture to the Yemen. His son, the Jerah of Genesis, was said to have separated the Arabic and Hebrew languages. Hud, whose tomb may still be seen in the Hadhramawt, was mentioned in the Holy Qur'an as the first of the Prophets of Arabia, while Job was also reputed to be a native of the Yemen.

We come on to firmer ground about 1200 BC, for from then

onwards the early inhabitants of the area enjoyed a very considerable culture. The Minaeans seem to have consisted of autonomous communities engaging in trade, while their neighbours, the Sabeans, who emerged a century later, were so active commercially that some of their wares have been found near Esyon Geber, the port of King Solomon. There must be few readers who do not know of the story of the visit to that monarch by the Queen of Saba (Sheba).

The main item of trade was incense, a commodity that was essential in the religious ritual of Egypt, Israel and Babylon and which can only be obtained from the southern shores of Arabia and from parts of East Africa which were often under Sabean rule. The Red Sea, with its storms and shoals, has always proved difficult for navigators but the domestication of the camel about 1000 BC made possible the development of overland trade routes. One writer of ancient times speaks of a caravan of 3,000 camels, which would have stretched twenty miles, arriving at the Mediterranean from South Arabia, while incense is mentioned in many books of the Bible from Exodus to Jeremiah, and Ezekiel refers specifically to trade with Aden. The collection of this precious aromatic was believed to be fraught with difficulties, for Herodotus heard that the trees were guarded by winged serpents whose venom the gatherers could only avoid by covering themselves with the hides of oxen. This did not, according to him, exhaust the wonders of an area where the sheep had such large tails that they had to be fitted with trailers, where laudanum came from the beards of billy-goats and where cinnamon was used by birds for building their nests on inaccessible peaks.

The states of ancient Arabia started as theocracies and although they later became kingdoms, their rulers retained hieratic functions – a tradition that persisted until 1962. The social stratification, which was almost a caste system, also survived until then, practically intact. In stone houses within walled cities dwelt priests, bureaucrats and leading merchants, while in humbler homes lived craftsmen graded from respectable to less noble trades. Outside the town lived the warriors, divided into tribes, who usually protected the peasants from all predators except themselves.

Like other peoples of that time, the South Arabians believed

in an after-life and buried useful objects with their dead. They had numerous deities, one of the most prominent being the god Wadd, whose worship was carried by traders as far as the Greek island of Delos. Coins inscribed with Athena and an owl also show the link with Greece, as did the architecture of the temples, although decorations showing bulls' heads were a purely local characteristic. A feature of Yemeni religion was the making of pilgrimages to sacred sites and it appears that some of the ritual has scarcely changed and may be seen at the tombs of saints today. The holy places were taken over by Islam and merely endowed with a more suitable legend; some scholars believe that the descendants of their old priests still survive and administer the sacred enclaves which fulfil a necessary function in providing a neutral ground between warring tribes.

Islam was also to adopt much of the old law of the Yemen, some of which has in consequence persisted until now. The importance attached to oath-taking by groups in specified places and forms can still be seen in tribal justice while the code of regulations for the market at Timna, dating from the fourth century BC, could still be applied practically unchanged.

The agriculture of Egypt and of Mesopotamia was based upon the exploitation of mighty rivers which were lacking in the Yemen, so a system had to be created to take advantage of brief floods after heavy rains. The ancient Arabians built the terraced fields still in use today and arranged to irrigate them by an intricate pattern of deflectors in the *wadis*. The most famous of these was the great dam at the Sabean capital of Marib which was built about 500 BC and was one of the wonders of the Peninsula. An agricultural expert has calculated that this dam irrigated 4,000 acres, which would have provided food for a population of some 300,000 souls. So important was the area that in a brief stay in 1869 the French archaeologist Halévy was able to record over 600 inscriptions, while it was said to have been so fertile that a man might walk under the fruit trees with a basket on his head which in a few minutes would fill with windfalls.

The Mineans and Sabeans started a tradition of craftsmanship for which the Yemen has remained famous. So great was the local industry that King Karib il-Watar erected an inscrip-

tion in about 450 BC which boasted that he had captured and resettled 1,000 weavers. Islam, with its prohibition of images, brought an end to the often brilliant portraiture which varied from the realistic to the highly stylised – but work has continued until today in bronze and silver.

South-West Arabia was more than an area of flourishing agriculture and manufacture with great exports in incense, myrrh and alabaster, for it was the point at which the trade routes from the Mediterranean, East Africa and the Far East converged. Maritime activity in this area presented few difficulties once the pattern of the monsoons had been understood. Greeks and Romans believed that the silks and spices which the Arabs brought from India and China were locally produced and so regarded Arabia Felix as a land of fabulous wealth.

About 110 BC the Himyarite dynasty arose and eventually came to rule the whole of what is now the two Yemens. Their tradition lingered on, and in the twentieth century monarchs still dwelt with pride upon their asserted Himyaritic descent. The Imams symbolised this descent by "signing" their missives by dipping a finger in a bowl of red ochre and running it along the text – the Arabic roots for *Himyar* and *red* are the same. The state was so well established that it was able to withstand a determined effort by the Romans to conquer it when in 24 BC the prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, collected an army of 10,000 Romans and 15,000 mercenaries, and marched down through the Hejaz. He was finally checked near Nisab by, tradition has it, the Shaykhs of Ma'an, whose *soi-disant* descendants ruled the area until 1967.

It was not, however, the soldiers but the sailors of Rome who destroyed much of the prosperity of South Arabia by learning themselves how to exploit the monsoons. The area was gradually relegated to a back-water as trade passed it by and the incense trade also declined. The crowning catastrophe was the collapse of the dam at Marib, destroying the irrigation system which had enabled agriculture to flourish. This disaster which echoed around Arabia is mentioned in the Qur'an.

Meanwhile, Christianity came to the Yemen. There is a legend that St Thomas preached there on his way to India, but it was not until the fourth century that there were churches in

the Himyar capital of Zafar near Yarim and in Aden. These communities were linked with the ecclesiastical authorities in Byzantium and Abyssinia, so it may have been partially as a gesture of Yemeni nationalism that Dhu Nuwas, who seized the Himyarite throne in 490, proclaimed himself a convert to Judaism. He carried out a fierce persecution of Christians, culminating in a famous massacre at Najran where it was said that 20,000 martyrs perished through being cast into pits filled with flaming oil.

The leaders of Christendom felt compelled to avenge this crime and with the encouragement of the Emperor Justin, the Abyssinian ruler, Caleb, sent an army across the Red Sea in 525. Dhu Nuwas was defeated and the Himyarite state fell as he spurred his horse into the sea to avoid capture. It is likely that the Jews of the Yemen – a group of perhaps 50,000 until 1948 and still surviving in small numbers today – stem not from Palestine but from local Arabs who adopted the faith under Dhu Nuwas.

The Abyssinian occupation was to last for half a century, during which time there was a restoration of Christianity symbolised in the construction of a magnificent church in Sanaa, the ruins of which can still be identified. The Abyssinian commander, who was in effect an independent ruler, tried for both religious and commercial reasons to turn this shrine into a rival to the traditional pagan pilgrimage centre of Mecca. In 570 he led forth an army, supported by elephants, to destroy the Kaaba. His force was wiped out, either by small-pox or, according to the Qur'an, by a huge flock of birds which bombed it with stones. In the same year the Prophet Muhammad was born.

The Abyssinian domination provoked a nationalist reaction which was led by a Himyarite prince who had survived the general massacre of his family. He sought aid from the Persian Emperor Chosroes whom he managed to convince that there was immense mineral wealth in the Yemen. He was given an army, consisting entirely of criminals released from jail, with the idea that if they succeeded, Persia would gain a new province; whereas if they failed their loss would hardly matter. The Abyssinians put up little resistance while the Arabs welcomed the descendant of their old Kings, despite his being

installed as ruler under Persian sovereignty. He was, however, murdered by his own guards; and after some years of disorder, a Persian general was appointed as *satrap*. His troops settled down, took local wives and became, so many believe, the ancestors of the *Akhdam*, the class that today performs menial tasks in the Yemen.

Persian rule lasted for half a century and for over one hundred years the country was either split by internal religious strife or under foreign occupation. This period cannot radically have altered the bases of Yemeni society for, looking back to the period ending with Dhu Nuwas, it is not fanciful to see in the polity of the Himyarites many of the elements which were to persist with surprisingly little change until the 1960s: obviously they must have suited the people and the country, but there is little wonder that twentieth-century visitors found them archaic.

The coming of Islam and the Middle Ages

After his flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 the Prophet Muhammad addressed a series of letters to the rulers of the world announcing his mission and calling upon them to accept Islam. With the apparent acquiescence of the majority of the people, the Persian *satrap* of Yemen declared himself a Muslim and was confirmed as Governor by the Prophet. The conversion, however, may not have been total, for it seems that in 631 Muhammad sent his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abu Talib, on a mission during which, according to legend, he converted all the 14,000 members of the great tribal confederation of Hamdan in a single day. Whether or not this happened, there came to exist a link between his descendants and those of Hamdan (who were later known as the Hashid and Bakil tribes) that was to last almost unbroken until the 1960s.

It would be in accordance with South Arabian customs if the Prophet's cousin Ali had been received less as a missionary than as an arbiter of tribal disputes, and the "conversion" indicated a willingness to accept his judgement. There has never been a readiness amongst South-West Arabian tribesmen to accept the verdict of their peers: they prefer to appoint an

outsider as umpire. The most acceptable of all umpires to this day is a man of noble and religious ancestry: no family in Arabia was more venerated than the House which controlled the Kaaba.

For a brief while it appeared that Yemeni particularism might prove too strong to accept a faith from outside its own borders, and a false prophet proclaiming a purely local religion attracted considerable support. He was, however, murdered and a rebellion after the death of Muhammad proved short-lived. Yemen became a distant province of the vast Arab Empire to which it contributed such large numbers of men that parts of the Hadhramawt were almost depopulated: families claiming Yemeni origins may still be found on the Atlantic coast of Morocco.

The Caliphs of Baghdad took little interest in the area and when in 822 their Governor, Muhammad ibn Ziyad, declared himself independent, they made no attempt to coerce him. Ibn Ziyad assumed the trappings of sovereignty; prayers were said in his name in the mosques, and he appeared in public under an umbrella with a golden shaft surmounted by balls of gold and jewels. He reunited practically the whole of the old Himyarite state under his sway from the city of Zabid, taxed shipping in the Red Sea and exacted tribute, which included 500 slave girls from the coast of Africa. Although this ruler's dynasty, the Banu Ziyad, lingered on for two centuries, its great days did not long outlast its founder; but it effectually split Yemen away from the main Arab Empire and reasserted its individuality.

Despite its remoteness, Yemen was to find itself one of the arenas in which, for the next three centuries, issues affecting the whole Muslim world were to be fought out. The Prophet had made no provision for the succession to the leadership of what quickly became the greatest empire that the world had yet seen, and this naturally became a matter for eager contention. One group argued that any Muslim endowed with the requisite qualities, including piety, learning and military skill, might become Caliph; while another party maintained that the choice of leader should be confined within the Quraysh tribe, with its tradition of religious and political pre-eminence. Yet a third section held that it was vital to have an Imam of direct descent

from the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. Fanatical adherents of this latter creed began to organise themselves as a secret international conspiracy, dedicated to the seizure of power – much as the Christians had done centuries before and the Communists were to do a millennium later. Much of their doctrine was extremely esoteric, but their organisation was practical and effective, based on a hierarchy of religio-political agents (*Da'is*) acting in the name of an Imam. Their opponents called them Ismailis, while they regarded themselves as Fatimids. They were active throughout the Islamic world from India and Persia to the Maghreb; in the early years of the tenth century, Fatimid groups assumed control of Eastern Arabia and Tunisia almost simultaneously.

We have seen that there already existed in the Yemen a tradition of support for Ali and his descendants and this had been kept alive by a series of Fatimid missionaries. This tendency was given a new impetus and made into an active movement when two secret envoys arrived in 881. The senior was Ibn Hawshab (later known as Mansur al-Yemen) who started recruiting adherents in the western highlands, where after some years of persistent work he established a small principality owing allegiance to the Fatimid Imam. The junior envoy, Ali ibn al-Fadl, who was to prove himself an exceptionally dynamic missionary-warrior, made his base in the mountains of Yafa where today the two Yemens meet. His ruthlessness became legendary and it was recounted that when he captured Zabid he slaughtered 4,000 virgins so that their charms should not divert his warriors from the *jihad*. His powers spread southwards, over-running Aden and Abyan and then, moving north, he took Sanaa after thirty years of campaigning. A Yemeni chronicler recounts that he had the courtyard of the Great Mosque flooded, and ordered that all the local maidens should be assembled and forced to swim naked while he stood in the minaret taking his choice.

Hostile propagandists recounted many such orgies amongst his followers, whose custom after drink and erotic dancing was to extinguish the lights and have sexual intercourse with the first partner that could be seized: "such practices are most shameful and pernicious" the chronicler, Baha al-Din al-Janadi, said severely. In 913 Ibn al-Fadl renounced his loyalty

to the Fatimids, declared himself the Mahdi and attacked and defeated his old colleague Ibn Hawshab. Two years later he was murdered: a doctor whom he had summoned sucked his lancet to show that there was no venom on it, then wiped it on his hair which he had previously smeared with poison before performing the operation. Ibn al-Fadl's state did not long survive him, and the Ismailis went underground again for more than a century.

Some years before the arrival of Ibn al-Fadl, the Yufirids, a noble family of Sanaa, rebelled against the Banu Ziyad and managed to confine their former lords to the Tihamah while they ruled the East and South. The Yufirids, who claimed Himyaritic origins, were the first native Yemeni rulers of the country since Dhu Nuwas. The last years of the ninth century were a period of chaos as these two dynasties fought against the Fatimids and against each other. The powerful north-eastern tribes escaped all control, but felt the need of an outside mediator to settle their own disputes, as their ancestors had done 250 years before. Once again their choice fell upon a member of the House of Hashim, a descendant of Zayd, the great-grandson of Ali. His name was al-Hadi ila'l-Haqq.

Al-Hadi arrived in 893, but his rigid insistence on the Shariah law proved so unpopular that after a short while he returned to the Hejaz. However, the tribes found their quarrels impossible to resolve, so in 897 they invited him back, thus clearly accepting a religious and indeed political "platform" that would differentiate them from their neighbours. He arrived at Sada with fifty followers, and proceeded to create a state that was to endure with numerous changes of fortune for over a thousand years all the while retaining many of the characteristics that he had imposed upon it.

Al-Hadi was clearly a very remarkable man. Like his ancestor Ali and his descendant Ahmad, the Imam of the 1950s, his physical strength was legendary. It was recounted that he could grind corn or rub out the inscription on a coin with his bare fingers, and that once when he seized a galloping camel by the tail, the hump and rear remained in his grasp while the head and front legs managed to make their escape over the horizon. He was a man of genuine learning, the author of forty-nine books, some of which are still used by Zaydi theologians, as

well as being a poet of distinction: like Ahmad he used verse as a weapon against his foes, and, as with Ahmad, magical powers were attributed to his blessing and his curse.

Like his twentieth-century descendants his rule was well suited to a harsh country: it was austere and rigid but not unjust. He saw himself less as a monarch than as the chief executive of a theocracy, administering immutable laws revealed by God through His Prophet. He therefore demanded absolute obedience in return for putting the spiritual welfare of his people above all other interests. A drunkard received eighty lashes, the Imam himself threw the first stone at adulterers, a village noted for sexual wrong-doing was destroyed, and the religious taxes, regarded in Islamic theory as a form of ritual purification, were punctiliously collected and used only for the benefit of the poor. Al-Hadi refused to dry himself or shelter from the sun with a piece of cloth belonging to the treasury.

Al-Hadi consolidated his state upon these lines. In an age when the Fatimids and the Abbasids aimed at universal rule, he never looked outside the Yemen. Before his death in 911 at the age of fifty-three he had fought seventy-three battles against the Ismailis, as well as campaigns in the Tihamah and Najran. The tenth century was a period of warlordism and in the general chaos Sanaa changed hands twenty times between 901 and 913. By 1000 there was the Zaydi state in the north and the remnants of the Banu Ziyad and the Yufirids in the south, while the Ismailis worked indefatigably underground, greatly encouraged by the establishment in 969 of a Fatimid Caliphate in control of Egypt.

In 1037 the Fatimids found a locally born leader, who with the blessing of Cairo raised his standard with sixty followers. Ali al-Sulayhi, acting as Viceroy on behalf of the Caliph, reunited the old Himyarite state under his control. He showed great military and diplomatic skill and was driven on by fanaticism. He killed the Imam of the Zaydis, and reduced them to impotence for over a century. He set up an effective and honest administration, and refrained from sectarian persecution. He moved the capital back to Sanaa, where he settled tribal leaders as comfortable hostages for the good behaviour of their peoples. Acting as agent for the Caliph, he sent envoys to the

Ismaili communities in India and captured Mecca from the representatives of the rival Sunni Caliph in Baghdad.

In 1067 Ali was murdered and succeeded by his son who, after a few years decided that he preferred merrymaking to the duties of government. These duties he permitted to be exercised by his wife Arwa (Sayyida bint Ahmad), who proceeded to achieve much of the celebrity of her predecessor the Queen of Sheba. Her gifts of statesmanship, sometimes acting as prime minister and sometimes as a general in the field, enabled her to control one of the most turbulent countries in the world for fifty years. During this time she also proved herself a great patron of writers and of the architects that she summoned to her new capital, Dhu Jiblah. She always appeared unveiled, as a sign that her rank was so exalted that no man would presume to harbour improper thoughts about her. Despite the power that she exercised, she still regarded herself as the servant of the Fatimid Caliphate. However, after her death in 1138, although part of the inheritance did fall to two competing Ismaili groups, the Fatimids were never again to dominate the country. They are now reduced to an occasionally-persecuted minority of some 50,000 souls.

Other contestants for control of the Yemen were the Mahdids, a family claiming Himyaritic descent, who succeeded by 1174 in bringing practically all Yemen except Aden and the Zaydi heartlands under an iron rule. This dynasty carried Sunni beliefs to the point of heresy, regarding all sin as infidelity to religion and thus punishable by death. Drinking wine, singing, adultery and failure to visit the graves of parents attracted the extreme penalty.

However, we can get a vivid, though doubtless overdrawn picture of life in mid-twelfth-century Yemen from the poet Umarah. One prince was so fond of poetry that "the stream of his liberality flowed in torrents" as thirty eulogists often held forth at a time and were all rewarded; another prince was more interested in his 1,000 concubines. A beseiged castle was saved when one hundred slave girls and fifty eunuchs dressed in armour charged out to rout the attackers. A Wazir returned home to find his castle occupied by enemies, and he died of shame when he saw his harem forced to dance on the battlements. A princess disposed of a wicked suitor by sending him

clothes impregnated in poison so that his flesh mouldered away. All-in-all, Umarah makes mediaeval Yemen sound as exciting as the Baghdad of Harun al-Rashid.

It is hardly surprising that the Yemen, with its wealth and its political divisions, attracted the covetous attention of a powerful neighbour. The great Saladin (Salah al-Din ibn Ayyub) had made himself Sultan of Egypt, finally extinguishing the Fatimid Caliphate. He wished to secure his rear from possible attacks from Fatimid adherents in the Yemen or from the Crusaders. His assumption of independent power had not been forgiven by his old master, the lord of Syria, who might well be expected to try to conquer Cairo. The possession of a rich remote province seemed most desirable, and control of the Red Sea had evident political and economic advantages.

In 1174, therefore, Saladin sent his brother Turanshah to conquer the Yemen which, apart from the inaccessible Zaydis, he succeeded in doing in the course of a year. It needed more hard fighting in the next decade by another brother to consolidate the Ayyubid state, which was to survive for half a century. During this time it built up a more business-like administration than the country had yet known. The dynasty actively encouraged trade, particularly through Aden, whose first walls date from this period. Marco Polo regarded its Sultan as one of the richest princes in the world through his export of horses, and heard that he had sent 30,000 horsemen and 40,000 infantry to campaign in Syria alongside the Ayyubids. An indication, although doubtless exaggerated, of the prosperity of the Yemen at this time may be found in the list of goods that the last Ayyubid took with him on his promotion to Governor of Syria. The chronicler al-Khazraji recorded that seventy ships were needed to carry away 1,000 eunuchs, 400 slave-girls, 500 cases of gorgeous materials, 300 loads of aloe wood, 70,000 pieces of Chinese brocade wrought with gold, and untold jewels, gold and works of art.

Despite the obvious opportunities for enrichment, no other Ayyubid appeared to claim their fief, and power remained in the hands of one of the Amirs that they had appointed. Nur al-Din Umar ibn al-Rasul thus became the founder of a dynasty which was to preside over the two most brilliant centuries of Yemeni history: in 1232 he assumed the signs of independent

sovereignty with his own coinage and prayers in his own name.

Nur al-Din took over the Ayyubid bureaucracy, turning it into a most sophisticated machine of government. He started the family policy of building, erecting a mosque in every village of the Tihamah and religious colleges with rich endowments in Taizz, Zabid and Aden. He conducted an active foreign policy, driving the Egyptians from Mecca and establishing relations with the Caliphs of Baghdad.

His activities were continued by his son, al-Muzaffar Yusuf, who reigned from 1249 until 1295, and whose magnificent mosque may be seen in Taizz. Encouraging his subordinates to foster learning, Yusuf was himself a skilled physician and a scholar whose legal knowledge put professional jurists to shame. His foreign policy was so active that al-Khazraji claimed that "the hearts of the Princes of Persia and the lords of India and China were filled with fear when they saw his ambition and power". He fought a series of campaigns with the Zaydis, often preceded by chivalric challenges in verse, but although he captured the Imam (courteously ensuring that he had sufficient concubines in jail), he never succeeded in destroying the obdurate mountaineers although he consolidated Sunnism in the south for all time. To the east he was more successful, over-running the Hadhramawt and collecting tribute from Shihr in ambergris, Indian dancing girls and civet cats. He launched, in 1279, a splendidly co-ordinated campaign against the ruler of Dhofar who had raided Aden: one column marched down through the Hadhramawt, a second was sent by sea and a third, supplied from ships, advanced along the coast. It is striking proof of the efficiency of Rasulid administration that the 500 cavalry and 7,000 infantry involved managed to converge on Raysut and kill the bandit chief.

Rasulid Yemen glittered in the next decades under his descendants, many of whom were flamboyant men of great learning and generosity. One used to picnic in the gardens of Zabid with 300 concubines for company; another sent two ship-loads of gifts to the Sultan of Egypt, which, in addition to Chinese jade, porcelains and brocades, included elephants and giraffes dressed in silk. A palace at Thabat near Taizz was decorated with marble and gold, and the eight gates of Zabid were given gilded pinnacles so that they shone like stars. Learning

flourished: a survey showed that there were 230 colleges in Zabid alone. Jurists were honoured by having their works carried to the Sultan on the heads of students to the roll of kettle-drums. Agriculture flourished: special officials supervised irrigation and one of the princes even wrote a scientific treatise on the culture of cereals. The Rasulids were respected abroad and exercised great influence in Mecca. Rulers in Abyssinia and India sent gifts and elephants, and a letter written on pure gold came from the King of Ceylon.

To maintain all this splendour, taxation was heavy, and occasional revolts were repressed with much eye gouging: a rising in Aden was defeated by the use of mighty ballistas which threw 40 tons of rock a day at the walls, and after the storming there was mass drowning of the rebels. Despite such troubles and some family disputes, the Rasulids managed to keep the Sultanate in a direct line for eight generations, although in their second century their territories started to shrink. The Zaydis, although frequently torn apart by disputes over the succession, recouped sufficient strength to capture Sanaa in 1323 and in the 1380s to raid Aden and Zabid. To maintain security the Rasulids were increasingly forced to rely upon Mamluks and mercenaries, and in the middle of the fifteenth century these groups split among themselves, often supporting different contenders to the throne.

Thus the Rasulids disintegrated, but much of their territory passed to their former vassals the Banu Tahir, who built up their power from a base in the Lahej–Abyan area. During their rule Aden probably had a population of 50,000, and several European visitors marvelled at its wealth and beauty. Hieronimo de Santo Stefano said in 1493 that "no other infidel potentate" could compare with its Sultan for justice and benevolence. The customs officers used to remove the masts from visiting ships so that they could not depart without paying their dues, and the rest of the administration seems to have shown the same practical efficiency.

In 1505 the Tahirids captured Sanaa from the Zaydis. Shortly afterwards the Italian traveller Ludovico de Varthema became the first European to describe it. He reported that its walls were so thick that eight horses could walk abreast on them. He saw much of the country, including al-Makranah,

where he reported that the Sultan kept more gold than 100 camels could carry. This stronghold, approached only by a seven-mile long track on which only two could walk abreast, had cisterns which held water for 100,000 people: as the Sultan kept 16,000 slaves and had another 16,000 in chains, provisions on this scale were obviously necessary. In the pages of Varthema we see a state which ranked amongst the richest and the best administered in the world. The great days of late mediaeval Yemen were, however, numbered: two years after the Tahirids took Sanaa, the Portuguese occupied Socotra.

Chapter Two

European Intervention, Isolation and Renewed Intervention

The first Europeans

When they had finally expelled the Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, the Spaniards and the Portuguese by no means regarded their crusade as finished. They counter-attacked in North Africa and when the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in 1498, they saw this as opening a new arena for the prosecution of the Holy War. The occupation of Socotra, where the people were reputed to be Christians, albeit of the most heterodox sort, was an obvious first step towards operations in the Red Sea, and as we have seen, this took place in 1507. A church and a fort were built on the island.

In 1509 Alfonso de Albuquerque, one of the greatest strategists of imperialist expansion in history, became Governor of the Portuguese possessions in India. He realised that the northern Indian Ocean could be dominated from great military bases at Diu, Goa, Hormuz and Aden. The wealth of this latter city was a further attraction, for, as the traveller Duarte Barbosa recorded "this place has a greater and richer trade than any other in the world, and also this trade is in the most valuable commodities". In March 1513 de Albuquerque arrived off Aden with 1,700 Portuguese troops in twenty ships. He had a friendly reception from the Governor, who sent fowls, sheep, lemons and oranges and offered to surrender the town, but de Albuquerque preferred his usual policy of obtaining submission by force; he therefore refused to parley.

It is possible that had he been less impetuous or less confident of victory, de Albuquerque might have found a local guide who could have shown him how to attack the city from the rear. As it was, he decided upon a direct assault on the

strong sea walls. Specially built scaling ladders up which six men could climb at a time were erected, and some soldiers penetrated the town before the ladders broke under the weight of armoured men. Some of the Portuguese trapped in the town escaped, but others refused to retreat in the face of a foe. A Hadhrami chronicler reported that a hundred of "the accursed" were slain. De Albuquerque was unable to attack again and had to content himself with capturing Sira Island, carrying off its guns and burning some forty ships in the harbour.

Undeterred, de Albuquerque sailed on into the Red Sea, where he hoped to make contact with Prester John. Since early mediaeval times, Europeans had believed that there was a mighty Christian Emperor in East Africa: the Portuguese had old plans for a joint campaign against the Muslims. De Albuquerque planned to enlist the help of this potentate to divert the Nile into the Red Sea (thus literally leaving Cairo high and dry) and to raid Medina to carry off the body of the Prophet, which he expected that the Muslims would surrender Jerusalem to regain. Prester John proved to be a myth, and de Albuquerque's grandiose schemes were far too much for his own unaided forces. He could do little more than establish a base on Kamaran Island where in a few months his forces were seriously weakened by deaths from fever. He did not feel strong enough to attack Aden on his way back to India, and he wrote to the King of Portugal that he would need at least 4,000 men.

Although he had actually achieved little there, de Albuquerque's appearance in the Red Sea caused panic amongst the Mamluks ruling Egypt. At the same time they saw themselves threatened from the north by the expansionist Ottomans under the ambitious Selim the Grim. Therefore, for very much the same motives as Saladin nearly 250 years before, the Mamluks decided to send a force to the Yemen in 1515. The Tahirid Sultan refused to supply their troops so they attacked him, achieving an easy superiority by the first use of firearms seen in the Peninsula. The Mamluk capture of Zabid was followed by plunder, burning and rape. The Zaydis, smarting under their recent loss of Sanaa, made common cause with the invaders against the Sultan who was killed; his state fragmented.

The Mamluks carried off the wealth of al-Makranah, looted Taizz and attacked Aden, where they were repulsed by the townspeople. However, Aden's defences were weakened, so when a fleet appeared under de Albuquerque's successor the Governor agreed to acknowledge Portuguese sovereignty. Lopo Soares accepted the keys of the fortress but neglected to garrison it, preferring to sail on to the Red Sea, where the climate of Kamaran claimed the bulk of his forces. When he returned to Aden, he found the defences restored and the people in no mood to admit him. The Portuguese thus lost the best chance that they ever had of controlling the city. Although in 1524 and again in 1530 the local ruler agreed to become their vassal, he ignored his pledge the moment that they were safely over the horizon.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Sultan had conquered Egypt in 1517, and the Mamluks in Yemen came to accept his suzerainty. For twenty years there was desultory fighting between the Mamluks, the resurgent Zaydis and the remnants of the Tahirids in Aden. By 1537 Ottoman influence had spread as far east as Shihr, where prayers were said in the name of Suleiman the Magnificent who was generally regarded as a sort of protector against the threatening activities of the Portuguese. Indeed, the Turkish Sultan, who had taken the relics of the Prophet to Constantinople and assumed the Caliphate, had become the strong arm of Islam, and even Muslim rulers in India requested his help against the infidel.

In 1538 Suleiman felt ready to challenge Portuguese naval supremacy in the eastern seas, and a fleet was equipped at Suez under a slave named Suleiman al-Khadim – a creature so ugly and so savage that he was said to resemble a beast rather than a man. When his fleet put into Aden, he invited the Tahirid Sultan on board and hanged him from the yardarm. Simultaneously, Turkish soldiers who had been sent ashore on stretchers, allegedly for medical treatment, rose up and seized the fortifications. Al-Khadim went on to India, where he suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the Portuguese, and on his return landed at Mokha. In a ruthless and treacherous campaign, with many massacres of prisoners, he conquered the Tihamah. He left it to his successor to take Sanaa and to install a Pasha to govern a province that reunited most of the old